Central American NEWSLETTER

Newsletter of the Central American Group of the Spanish Main Society.
Editor: Michael P. Birks, 36 Trevor Road, Flixton, URMSTON, Manchester M41 5QH. England. 0161-747 5924.

Vol.III, No.63 **April 1996**

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The **Central American Group** is a part of the **Spanish Main Philatelic Society,** the leading Society in the world for collectors of Latin America. The journal of the SMPS is *The Mainsheet*, published quarterly, and is available by annual subscription from the Secretary, Brian Moorhouse, PO Box 105, PETERBOROUGH PE3 8TQ, England. Phone 01733 2687078. Subscription is currently £8 in Europe or $20 elsewhere. Cheques in sterling of US$ should be made payable to "The Spanish Main". A three year subscription of £21/$54 and a five year subscription of £30/$80 are available and payment for these longer subscriptions may be made by Access, Mastercard or Visa. The minimum subscription is one year. If joining during the course of the year the appropriate part subscriptions should be added - Feb-Apr £6/$15; May-Aug £4/$10; Sep-Nov £2/$5 to pay through to the following January when the subscription paid will come into effect.

The **Central American Group** caters for the collectors of Mexico to Panama. Its journal, which you are now reading, is published quarterly, and is available by annual subscription. The subscription is currently £6/$11 resident in the UK or in Europe, or £8/$15 elsewhere. The minimum subscription is one year. If joining after June 1st, add 50% to pay through to the following January when the subscription paid will come into effect. Cheques in sterling payable to "The CA Group" should be sent to the treasurer, David Hankey, 2 Prince's Drive, Marple, STOCKPORT SK6 6NJ, England. Phone 0161-449 0693. We shall be pleased to forward the relevant portions of multi-subscription cheques to the SMPS or the Chile Group.

We regret we cannot accept dollar cheques for subscriptions because each cheque costs £5/$8 to negotiate.

Back issues are available to members at 75p/$1.50 each, although Volumes 1 and 2 can be purchased for £10/$20 each, complete, inclusive of postage. Non-members may request a sample copy for 75p/$1.50 post paid. Requests for back issues should be sent the the Editor, to whom cheques should be made payable. Undated dollar cheques are acceptable for this service.

The group leader is Richard Saundry, Gwrych Cottage, Godstone Road, Bletchingley, REDHILL RH1 4PL, Surrey, England. Phone 01883 742186.

The group does not run a packet. The SMPS Packet Secretary is Brian Sylvester, 3 Russell Court, St Lukes Road, MAIDENHEAD SL6 7AP Berkshire, England. Phone 01628 784555.

Although most packets are of a general nature, there are occasional specialised one country packets. Good and unusual material is always wanted.

Owing to insurance difficulties, the packet is not available to overseas members, although we shall be pleased to accept material for inclusion from them.

The auctioneer of the SMPS is Brian Moorhouse, to whom Auction and Private Treaty lots should be sent. Brian is a dealer, and will include your name on his mailing list if requested to do so.

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EDITORIAL

May I, again, draw your attention to my home address at the top of this page. I now *know* that I shall not be returning to the classroom.

You may recall the following plea in our last issue;

> "You will notice that a portion of this issue has been written by me. You should not assume that I wish to impart my philatelic knowledge to the world, but rather that I did not have enough copy to fill this issue! So, if there is something you would liike to say to us all I shall be most pleased to hear from you. If there is a subject about which you would like to read please let me know. It may well be that such an article already exists (and I have blanket permission to reprint most articles) or I may well know someone from whom such an article could be commissioned. I have to say that of late correspondence has been less than sparse and I have never heard from many of you. That's fine of you are happy with what you get but surely there must be something more the group could do for you through its Newsletter?"

Sadly it went largely unanswered and I find myself having to say it again.

For the diary:- **Saturday 9 March 1996**, 10.30 a.m.

Victory Services Club, Seymour Street, Marble Arch.
Panama and the Offshore Islands of Latin America.

EXTRA ***Brian Moorhouse will be displaying part of Kilian Nathan's Nicaragua, which he has just acquired. This is the finest collection of Nicaragua ever assembled, and if you missed the display at the Royal some years back this may be your last chance to see it.***

Saturday 18 May 1996, commencing 1.00 p.m. prompt

Viewing in the morning, finished by 4.30 p.m.
The Station Hotel (next to the railway station), Peterborough
Spanish Main auction with Brian Moorhouse

mpb

Moses Taylor Apr 4 depart SF for Nic
May 9 arrive SF

Santiago de Cuba
Apr 15 depart NYC

Guiding Star
Apr 7 depart NYC for NZ
Apr 30 arrive NYC

FROM VANDERBILT TO LESSEPS

by MICHAEL P BIRKS FRPS,L

The final sailing of the steamers of the Central American Transit Company was 5 October 1868, the steamer scheduled for 20th being cancelled. This final sailing brought to an end the era of the gold rush steamers which had carried mail, gold and above all, prospectors between San Francisco and New York. The original idea behind the transit, at least in public for the benefit of the Nicaraguan Government, was to build an inter-oceanic canal through the isthmus at Nicaragua. It appears that Vanderbilt felt the Nicaraguan Government would not grant permission for a transit without a sufficiently lucrative incentive, and this was it. History recalls that Vanderbilt never built that canal.

But that was not the end of the idea to build a canal through Nicaragua although you might believe so if you read articles written on the subject.

In the post-civil war period interest first centred around Panama in response to an 1864 survey by Frederick M Kelley of New York. 1867 saw funds voted for a survey begun two years later but negations failed when the Colombians, of which Panama was then a part, refused to grant American sovereignty over the route or to guarantee the movement of US ships in time of war.

With funds approved by Congress in 1870, United States President Grant appointed a commission on 13 March 1872 with the purpose of gaining as much information as possible about trans-isthmian routes in general and not just Nicaragua. The commission, known as the Interoceanic Canal Commission, included Chief Army Engineer General A A Humphreys, the Superintendent of Coast Survey C P Patterson and the Chief of the Bureau of Navigation Admiral Daniel Ammen who had taken great interest in the canal project.

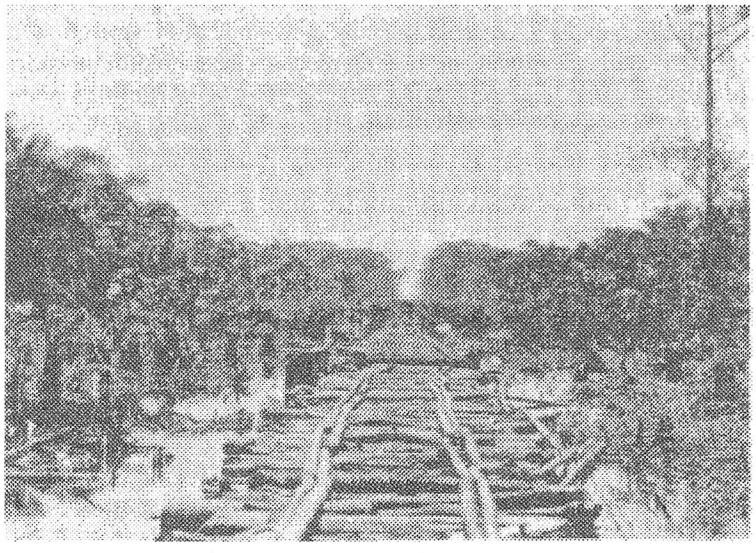
The Commission looked into various routes, via the Atrato River in Colombia, the Darién isthmus route and the Tehuantepec route being amongst the most feasible. However the Nicaraguan route looked the most promising and so in 1872 a survey expedition set out. Finally the route proposed by Child was verified as being the most promising and a hydrographic survey party was left to study the lake with Captain Lull in charge and Lieutenant A G Menocal chief engineer. Lull and Menocal also surveyed the Panama route but came down in favour of the Nicaraguan route in a report to the President dated 7 February 1876 in which they stated:

> "that the route known as the 'Nicaraguan Route'.....offers fewer difficulties..... than any one of the other routes".

Three years later on 15 May 1879 the International Scientific Congress assembled in Paris with 136 delegates, 74 of which supported Lesseps, builder of the Suez Canal. The cost of the Nicaraguan canal was estimated at $143m whilst that of Panama at $208m, giving a clear financial advantage to Nicaragua. I find it unbelievable that at this point Lesseps was able to re-evaluate his project, return a figure of $140m, and the delegates were gullible enough to vote for Panama - but they did.

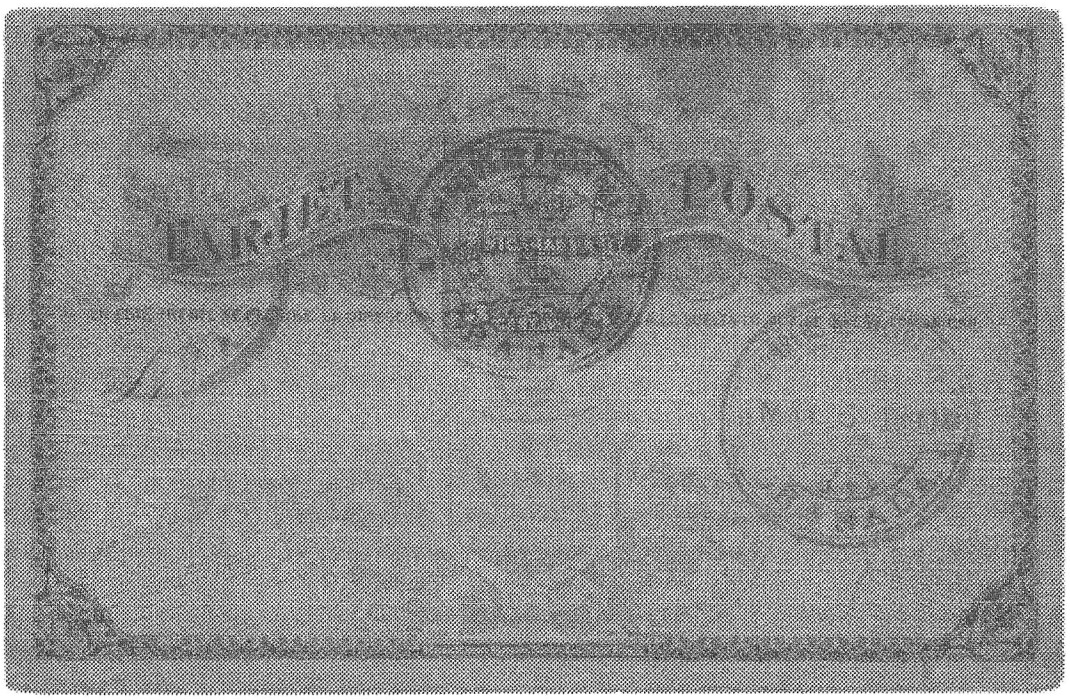
The Maritime Canal Company of Nicaragua formed the Provisional Interoceanic Canal Society as the American answer to French high-handedness at the '79 Congress and accepted Menocal's recommendations. As one of a group which also included Admiral Amman, Menocal sought Presidential approval in order to use Grant's name to rival that of Lesseps. Menocal was sent to Nicaragua to negotiate concessions and with the proviso that work began by 22 May 1880 was granted the necessary approval. Work did not begin by the given date and the concession lapsed in September 1884 by which time the French Panama Canal project was well launched.

A second treaty known as the Freylinghuysen-Zavala treaty failed to be ratified in December 1884 and this effectively ended the Company. Incorporated under US law on 20 February 1889 the company was reorganised with $150m in 50% bonds and $100m in ordinary stock. Hiram Hitchcock was elected President and Menocal was retained at Chief Engineer and on 26 May 1889 a construction party was sent to Nicaragua.



Laying rails to the construction site, four miles west of Greytown, 1890.

The card below was sent from Rivas to New York, via Granada on 5 May 1890 by Charles Lobner who was in some way involved. Written in pencil, the message side will not reproduce sufficiently well and the address has been rubbed out, although "New York" is just visible.



On the back, Charles Lobner says

> Friend Jess
> Nothing in sight yet. The Chief Engineer on the canal told me the contract for the R(ail)R(oad) was let and Harris & Treat would be here on the next steamer with 500 men to commence work. Rumor has it that the contracts are all let but nothing definite is known yet. Tucker & McLean went to Port Limon today. Will write when anything turns up.
> Yours
> Chas Lobner"

The line of the canal was laid out, storehouses built and even a hospital service organised. In addition the harbour at San Juan del Norte was dredged, but despite all the work done and an investment of $6m the US Congress would not support the venture and private capital was not forthcoming following the financial crisis of 1893. Work stopped and the Company went into liquidation. on 30 August 1893.

US funds were appropriated to study the problem and the United States-Nicaragua Canal Board, also known as the Ludlow Commission visited Nicaragua in 1895.

The 1895 survey concluded that the 174 mile route could be divided into three main divisions. The western part, from the Pacific to the Lake ran from Britto to Lajas, a distance of 17.7 miles at an elevation of 154 feet above sea level, 44 feet above the level of the lake. It was to be tackled with the installation of three 35 foot locks and a 25 foot tide lock, with a water depth of 30 feet.

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The second, or central division, consisted of the lake and river, and ran from Lajas to Fort San Carlos (56.5 miles) and Fort San Carlos to Ochoa (69 miles). Here a dam was planned, which would be descended by three locks of 40, 35 and 31 feet respectively.

The third, or eastern division, from Ochoa to Greytown was 31.4 miles and would end in a much improved harbour protected by a 1,000 foot breakwater. Later surveys in the 1930's did not vastly change the Childs-Menocal plan.

The 1895 survey was the first of three survey commissions which would arrive at essentially the same conclusions as the Menocal survey twenty years before. The second and third surveys were known as the Walker Commissions and their surveys were made between 1897 and 1901, exceeding the deadline (9 October 1899) for completion of the Canal. Again the Maritime Canal Company defaulted on its contract.

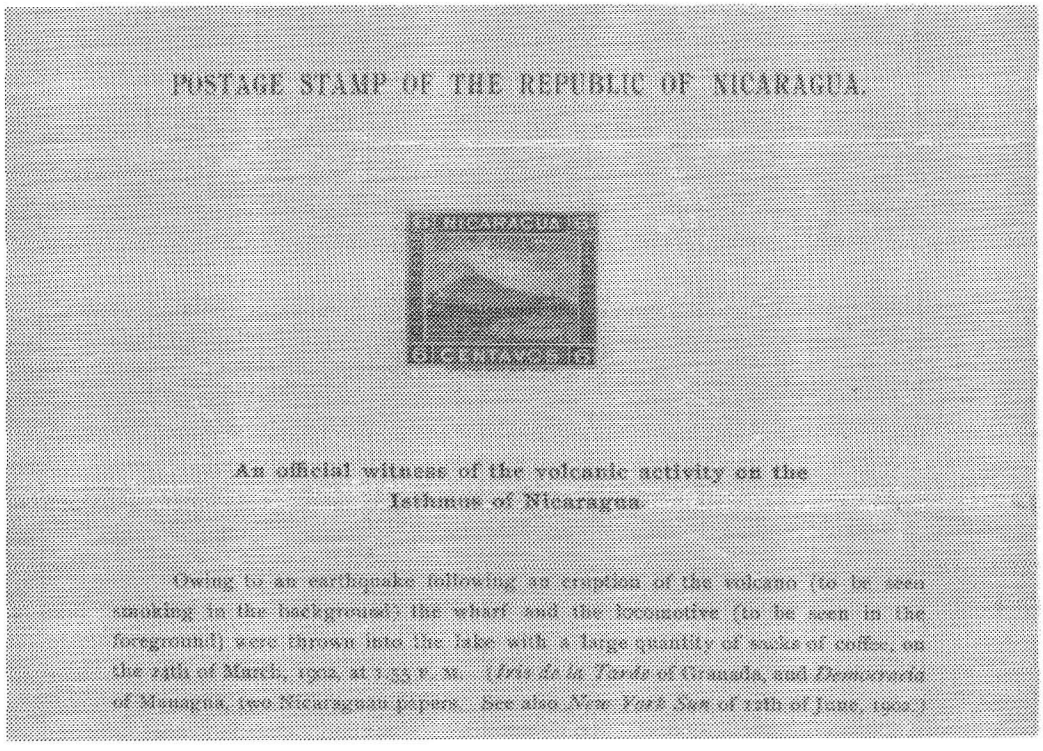
It appears that a Mr Henry Welles Durham was a part of the commission in Nicaragua in 1898. The cover below was sent to him at Greytown, from new York and carried on the SS Altair, about which I know nothing. The cover was three weeks in transit.

Mounting pressure in the Congress led to the introduction in early 1900 of the Nicaraguan Canal Bill, which authorised the President to acquire the necessary territory for the canal. The proposal to cut the Canal through Nicaragua had been discussed and surveyed for so long that one Representative declared that the US had "almost.....a photograph of every grasshopper and bug that could be found in all that 179 miles of tropical country".

"Complete the Nicaraguan Canal at once" (2nd line top left)

A cover carried locally in San Diego, produced by the American Nicaraguan Canal Association.

One of the legendary circulars sent to US Senators to influence the choice of route.


POSTAGE STAMP OF THE REPUBLIC OF NICARAGUA.

An official witness of the volcanic activity on the Isthmus of Nicaragua.

Owing to an earthquake following an eruption of the volcano (to be seen smoking in the background) the wharf and the locomotive (to be seen in the foreground) were thrown into the lake with a large quantity of rocks of ashes, on the 27th of March, 1901, at 1.55 P. M. (*Vide de la Verde* of Granada, and *Democrata* of Managua, two Nicaraguan papers. See also *New York Sun* of 28th of June, 1901.)

The story of Philippe Buneau-Varilla President of the French Panama Company has been told many times in many journals and need not be repeated here. However it should be noted that propaganda was rife on both sides of the argument, as evidenced by the cover and card on the previous page.

Whilst the propaganda of the card, declaring Nicaragua unfit as a route through the volcanic activity depicted, surely must have helped the pro-Panama lobby the deciding factor must have been the offer of the French Company to sell the United States its assests for £40 million in early 1902. This was in response to an earlier, higher, offer which was refused by the US leading the Congress to recommend Nicaragua.

The rest is history.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR from J A van Rijn

After a relatively uneventful period in which only standard catalogue material passed through my hands I can now report another special find.

Shown below you will see a strip of five from the top of the sheet of 4 Cordoba value for the 500th birthday of Rafael issued on 15 September 1983, depicting "Madonna of the Meadow" (SG 2524; Yvert 1037). You will be able to see clearly that the stamps are imperforate along their top edge.

If other collectors have come across this, or any other perforation error on modern Nicaraguan stamps I would like to hear from them.

[Mr van Rijn very kindly enclosed an example of this error for me in his letter - Ed]

MORE ON GUATEMALAN PICTURE POSTCARDS FROM THE MEXICAN LEGATION

by CÉCILE GRUSON

With reference to Richard Saundry's article *A Guatemalan "A.R." Picture Postcard,* and as owner of another item from the same correspondence, may I be allowed to add a few comments.

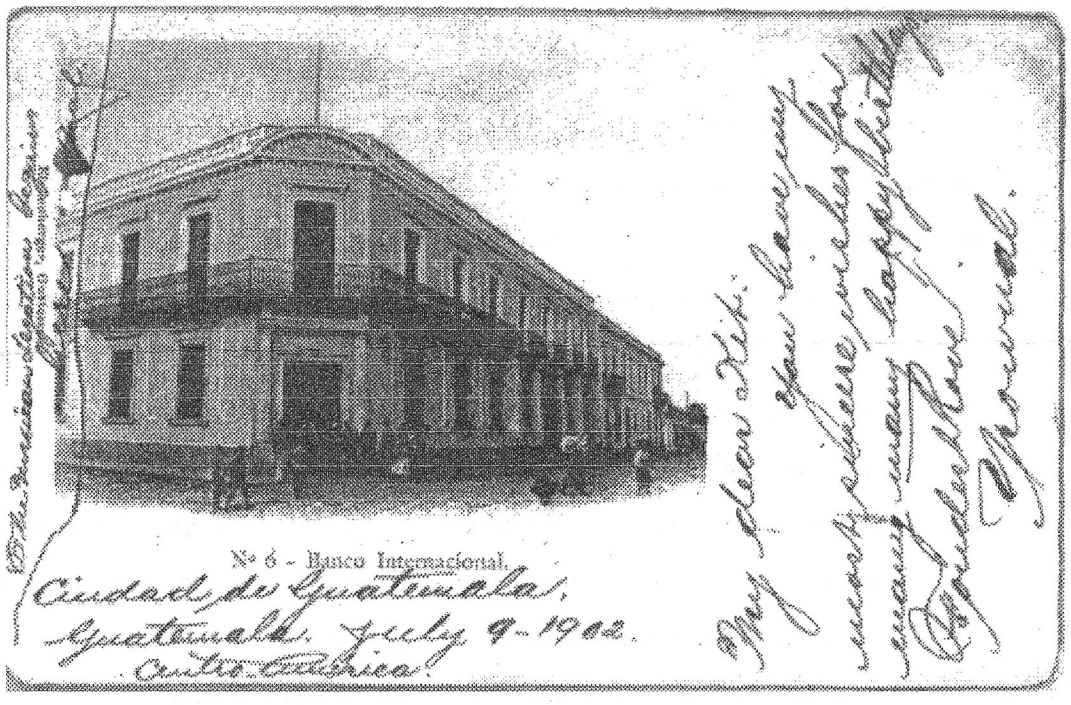
According to Henry Madden, the writer of these cards was the young English wife of the then Minister of Mexico to Guatemala, hence the legation handstamp on all three cards.

In those days, postcards as well as printed matter did not always get a datestamp on departure: the more usual devices used were the "Guatemala 1" and "Guatemala 2" in circle markings, which was used on Richard's second card. The "A.R." handstamp being similar in size might have been used by error. My card, illustrated hereafter, was cancelled with a brand-new registry datestamp, which is also theoretically an error. In practice, mail was cancelled with whatever device happened to be available.

The proper postcard rate to foreign countries from 1881 to November 6, 1902, was 3c., so only the earliest of the three cards is properly franked. From the items known, it appears that the Guatemalan Post Office did not systematically tax underfranked postcards, and would obviously

have avoided doing it on mail from a diplomatic mission. I am positive that the cards were not registered, because then a complete prepayment of postage (3c) plus registry (15c) would have been required, and the item(s) would normally carry a registry box with a number as well, and an arrival mark at the London end.

The signature is puzzling, but could have been a convention between the two friends at a time when postcards were not necessarily signed in such a way that all could recognize who was the writer: if the letters are read in reversed order, the signature already looks better, possibly as a contraction of the writer's first and maiden last name: LAUWORY. This has to remain guesswork, however.



The building on Saundry's second card is *Gran Hotel España,* located in the vicinity of Teatro Colón, at the corner of 8th street and 11th avenue, probably one of the best in Guatemala at the time. It has long since disappeared. Note the tracks on the street which were for a horse-drawn omnibus line.

Mail required between 20 to 25 days between Guatemala and Europe at the turn of the century, while the telegraphic service, started in 1873, was already fairly developed. The only detailed figures in my possession are from an 1894 *postal* guide. There were then almost 2,900 miles of telegraphic cables in Guatemala, and 127 telegraphic offices. The *Central & South American Telegraph Co.* routed cables to Great Britain via Galveston for a fee of 75c gold (i.e. $) per word.

FURTHER INFORMATION ON THE BEGINNING OF REGULAR COSTA RICAN AIR MAIL SERVICES

by Dr RICHARD H. SAUNDRY

In the July 1995 issue of Central American Newsletter (No.60 pp. 364-68) your editor published my article on the beginnings of regular Costa Rican air mail services after 1930. In that presentation, based almost entirely on the writings of others, I asked a number of questions about the first PanAm flights of March 1930. Further to this article I have been sent some highly pertinent information by my good friend Marino Riosa, one of whose main collecting interests is that of the airmail services of Mexico. He has furnished me photocopies of pages from the Mexican airmail magazine "El Correo Aereo" published in 1930. The information provided by this Mexican journal is, I submit, extremely exciting because not only do we have an account of the first regular Costa Rican airmail services written from the perspective of collectors living in a neighbouring country where some of the Costa Rican covers were actually sent, but it is probably the most contemporary account of these first flights that we have to date. For those who will not have ready access to "El Correo Aereo" I must point out that the principal article was penned in Spanish by Sr. Emilio Acosta Carranza, a correspondent then living in San Jose, Costa Rica; and there was an editorial written in English by Sr. Victor M. Suarez of Merida, Yucatan. Sr. Suarez is recognised as having been one of the principal authorities on Mexican airmails so we may safely assume that what he wrote was very accurate. I emphasise this point here at the beginning because although the information that has now surfaced fills several gaps in our knowledge of the events of March 1930, the article raises certain new questions which I find hard to answer.

First, Sr. Carranza tells us that the signature at the bottom of the first flight cachets was that of Ricardo Toledo, Director General de Correos. If for no other reason I shall be eternally grateful for Marino in providing me with this little bit of information. As I said in my article this signature has been puzzling me a number of years and it is so nice to have it explained. Personally I find it most amazing that with so many avid collectors of Costa Rican stamps and covers that it should have taken so long for someone to come up with the information I required. I suppose it was obvious it had to be the Postmaster General, but it does highlight the problem of any collector living outwith the country finding details of even the most basic of information.

This information about the first flight cachets is backed up with illustrations of those employed. There were nine cachets with designations of the countries where the letters were despatched: to (1) Estados Unidos de A. (2) Colombia (3) Argentina (4) El Salvador (5) Guatemala (6) Honduras (7) Mexico (8) America del Sur (9) Extranjero. As I have explained these cachets were originally intended only to be used on the respective letters but there are instances known where cachets were struck on envelopes destined for other countries. I have found examples of all these cachets except for those designed for letters sent to Colombia and Argentina. Few letters were sent to these countries (7 and 26 respectively) and if any examples have survived they would be considered desirable rarities. I cannot remember if the existence of these particular cachets has ever been mentioned before.

In my article I gave a breakdown of the numbers of first flight letters sent from Costa Rica over FAM Routes 5 and 8. I now quote those cited by Sr. Carranza and those in brackets were those figures 1 wrote in my article. The close agreement of these two sets of figures suggests our Mexican report to be essentially very accurate.

USA, (inc. those to Europe, Asia, Africa and Oceania)	2,466	(2,656)
Canada	210	
Mexico	50	
Cuba	166	(161)
Nicaragua	98	(98)
Honduras	67	(67)
Brit. Honduras	22	(22)
El Salvador	172	(172)
Guatemala	161	
Haiti	23	

Those to southward destinations (13 March 1930):

Panama	255	(225)
Colon	73	(73)
Colombia	7	
Argentina	26	
Ecuador	6	
Peru	8	
Chile	10	
Venezuela	71	
Cristobal	386	(386)

These figures tell us 3,456 (3,476) letters were flown northwards on 11 March, and 842 (684) covers flown to southward destinations on 13 March, a grand total of 4,298 pieces, in close agreement with the 4,160 covers I had calculated. There are some minor discrepancies but in general the two sets of figures agree quite closely. I suggest we accept the figures given in "El Correo Aereo" as being authentic: the most pleasing aspect of this new information is the specification of covers flown to individual countries in South America.

It would be a coup to find any covers addressed to Colombia, Argentina, Peru, Ecuador or Chile. The report of 71 covers sent to Venezuela suggests they should in theory be as plentiful as those sent to Colon (73), but as the Colon covers seem to be relatively easy to find and those for Venezuela seem never to be offered on the philatelic market I question the number sent to Venezuela, but that is only a personal reservation.

Sr. Carranza goes on to tell us that the total weight of mails flown north on 11 March was 20 kilos. These mails were despatched from La Sabana airport, San Jose, and there was a special ceremony attended by the President and his Prime Minister, the Home Secretary, the Postmaster General (these were not their actual titles but this is what they approximate to when translated into British political offices), and Sr. Maximo Soto Hall, reporter of "La Prensa", a Buenos Aires newspaper. Most importantly the plane flew to Chomes Beach (Puntarenas) where connection was made with the plane flying north piloted by J.S.B. Barney, and his mechanic (co-pilot) Otto Wieselmayer. This bit of information I find a little startling.

We know that in January trial flights were made in and out of Chomes but I had always assumed that by March flights were via San Jose. I doubt that there would have been a feeder service La Sabana to Chomes, but in absence of alternative information we will have to accept it for the present at face value. I really wonder why PanAm would station an aircraft in Costa Rica to operate this special connecting service, especially in view of what we know happened after the floods of the previous November. Even Sr. Suarez repeats this bit of information "the main stop on the route at Costa Rica is Puntarenas, from where planes fly to San Jose, both on the Northbound and Southbound flights."

Perhaps the best explanation for this is that each PanAm plane made two stops in Costa Rica, but this I think most unlikely.